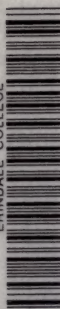


ERINDALE COLLEGE



3 1761 02126134 2

Saintsbury, George Edward
Bateman

The historical character
of English lyric

ERINDALE COLLEGE LIBRARY

PR
504
S35

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

III

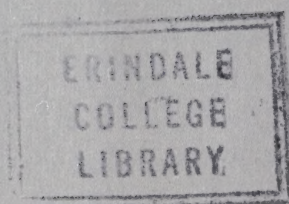
THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER OF
ENGLISH LYRIC

By G. SAINTSBURY

FELLOW OF THE ACADEMY

Read October 30, 1912

Apr 04/07



PR
504
S35

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

III

THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER OF ENGLISH LYRIC

By G. SAINTSBURY

FELLOW OF THE ACADEMY

Read October 30, 1912

THE title which has been chosen for this lecture is perhaps open to criticism; but one of the first considerations which led to the choice of it was a wish to exclude, as far as possible, one of the thorniest, and not perhaps one of the most fruitful, of the innumerable questions of literary definition. The problems whether Lyric, as such and in the abstract, owes its differentia to form or to matter; whether its essence is subjective or objective; or whether this is to be found in such a very accidental and circumstantial essentiality as suitability for actual singing, might of course be dragged into the present discussion, but only by a kind of not very heavenly violence. 'The historical character of those sorts or parts of poetry which would generally be recognized as composing English lyric at successive periods' might, reversing the ordinary practice of giving a 'short title', be recognized as the 'long title' of this paper.

The sonnet will indeed be excluded; but not so much because its lyrical character has been contested as because it lies outside the specific if not the generic content of the subject. The sonnet is much the same, whatever its possibilities of subdivision, in all countries, times, and languages. The unknown genius who created it—much more probably the unknown Fortunatus in whose way it was placed and who found it—gave it, or left on it, something that is cosmopolitan and independent of time. And so *we* may leave it.

In general English lyric there are undoubtedly features which are on the one hand peculiar and on the other traceable in the evolution

of their peculiarity. We Englishmen—or at least such of us as think about the matter at all, and have taken some pains to sift our thinkings thoroughly—are for the most part perhaps apt to think very highly indeed of it. But it has to be remembered that this estimate is not universal by any means, even among ourselves; and has sometimes been distinctly traversed by foreigners of various nations, some of whom have by no means been hostile in disposition or inappreciative of English literature generally.

It can hardly be regarded as necessary to cite these latter; but I may perhaps remind you that in the middle of the nineteenth century a writer who was a scholar, really a man of letters and interested in the subject, Archdeacon Evans, went to the extravagant length of declaring that 'English lyric must always be a blank'; while much later Mr. Swinburne, himself a consummate practitioner of it, deliberately excluded lyric from the position of competitor with similar functions of other languages as representing the greatness of English literature.

This latter dictum was, it is true, cursory, and may be to some extent subject to discount in view of the fact that the writer was one very apt to be carried away by advocacy and was at the moment in the position of advocate of another department, Drama. But in other decriers of our lyric I think it is possible to discover certain general prejudices—in the strict meaning of that word—which throw a good deal of light on their mistake. And I know no better way of doing this than to undertake, if only in outline, but perhaps from more than one point of view, the survey indicated in my title.

There is perhaps no point which ought to strike the inquirer into this matter more forcibly than the fact that while English literature is notoriously composite in character, no part of it is more manifestly so than its lyric. Whether, in Old English itself, there is next to no lyric, or whether there is next to nothing else—propositions both of which have been advanced—need not be discussed here: for the question, like so many others, is again a mere logomachy of definition. But when we come to Middle English there is no further doubt about the matter. It is of course, in a fashion, a coincidence that the first distinguished and delightful collection of lyric that has come down to us is trilingual, but, as in the case of not a few other coincidences, causation is not absolutely far off. The influence of Latin and of French is upon *Alison* and its companions, as obviously as the poem itself is found in company with examples of these actual languages. And—fact complementary of this, but too often neglected—the peculiar fashion of mixed obligingness and self-reliance in which

English has always taken foreign influences is manifest likewise. From the Latin hymns and proses which our unknown song-writers were constantly hearing, from the French and Provençal romances and varied lyric forms of all kinds that they were in not a few cases reading, but most probably hearing still more, they drew rhyme and metre, stanza-form and trick of refrain, diction almost always and accent-quantity sometimes. From their own ancestral tongue they took less in appearance—so much less indeed that careless or prejudiced inquirers have constantly undervalued and sometimes actually denied the importance of this factor in the problem. But those who had eyes to see have always seen the abiding influence of English phrase; the singular and probably unique effect produced by the intermixture of the two accentuations; and, above all, the characteristic—differencing from all French and from the majority of at least mediaeval Latin—of the great Old English principle so often ignored and to this very day mistaken or denied, the principle of Equivalence—of the allowance of two syllables as equal to one, not as a licence, not as a mark of irregular and slovenly composition, not as an occasional device to produce a particular and exceptional effect, but as a main and principal feature of the language and as an ancestral beauty of the poetry.

We may see, towards the close of our survey, how this peculiar hybridity may have acted to the detriment, critically speaking, of our lyrical reputation, not merely with foreigners, which is hardly surprising and comparatively unimportant, but with natives, which is both surprising and grievous; but for the present let us keep to the straight path of history. Of all the manifold misjudgements which have made the study of English literature to too large an extent a very warren and covert for the chase of such game, there have been few more strange and more discreditable than the obstinate delusion that English lyric begins with the Elizabethans—Wyatt and Surrey being graciously, and sometimes with a considerable expense of rhetoric, admitted as ‘morning stars’, ‘Dioscuri of the dawn’, and I know not what else. There never has been much excuse for this since the labours of that most worthy scholar in whose honour this lecture was instituted, and there has been none since those of Thomas Wright and his colleagues of the Percy and Warton Societies, excellently taken up in a general way by the Early English Text Society under the unflagging impulse of our regretted colleague Dr. Furnivall—in particular by Mr. Bullen in his five-and-twenty years old collection of carols, and more recently by Messrs. Sidgwick and Chambers in theirs. But to kill these prejudices—

though some of us have endeavoured to help this most just execution in the duller way of literary history—is a pretty hard task, and a desperately long one. I have sometimes felt inclined to ask my scientific friends whether they christened that mosquito whom some of them try to destroy by the name of *Anopheles*, because there is nothing so hard to destroy as a thoroughly useless thing.

But it may be hoped that, in this audience at least, it is not necessary to explain at great length that the lyric of the thirteenth century is existent and not seldom charming, that that of the fourteenth is more abundant and more charming still, though, as it happens, none of the greater poets of its closing years, neither Chaucer, nor Gower, nor Langland, contributes to it in genuine English kind; and that, in the fifteenth, the dullness of the rest of South English verse is compensated by delightful bursts of carol and ballad, of song profane and divine, in the most diverse kinds.

But in all this—and I think that some even of this audience would be a little astonished if there were to be produced a *Corpus Poetarum Lyricorum* for these three centuries—the characteristic hybridity, or rather the characteristics resulting from the hybridity, continued. There was still the association of the rather elaborate forms of the Romance languages in all cases which would admit of it—some, such as the *ballade*, would not—of the ancestral and ineradicable English freedom, elasticity, and swing. I used to think, many years ago, that you could discover, sometimes at any rate, anapaests in Old French, but the late M. Gaston Paris, with all that urbanity which he possessed, and which is perhaps not invariably born with the scholar, assured me that to a French ear at any rate they were inaudible. My English ear never hears them in Old English, though it hears something that is capable of becoming or yielding them. But it hears them, in the making, from almost the very first in Middle English, and by the fifteenth century they are as clear and finished, if not as sustained—they are sometimes even that—as in Prior or in Anstey, in Barham or in Mr. Kipling. It is by their admixture that the marvellous powers of the ballad or common measure are brought out; by their charm that such a measure as that of ‘E.I.O.’, or ‘Back and side go bare, go bare’, almost unthinkable in a Romance language, is rendered possible. While the so-to-speak official and literary poetry of Southern English moves in a dull and regular march or (more frequently) staggers in hopeless efforts, as solemnly catalogued and classified by some; while the beautiful but mannered and artificial poetic diction or dialect of Middle Scots permits itself no such curvets; our ballads and carols, our drinking songs and

nursery rhymes always preserve the hybridity which has become fruitful and perpetual—which in its fruitfulness and its 'perpetuity' no other language, not even German, can match.

It should be only for a moment, if even for that, surprising that the famous reform of Wyatt and Surrey produced at first effects upon our lyric which were, if improving from one point of view and in the long run, positively impoverishing for the time and from another point. It was still from Romance languages that they drew their lessons; and though the Romance languages, with their tried and polished poetry, could well enough correct the intolerable slovenliness that had come upon English verse of what should have been the more formal kind, it was not at all likely to leave our lyric as supple as before. Indeed, it was at this time that there first established itself the deplorable heresy that there was in English only 'a foot of two syllables'—from which it almost necessarily followed that lyric must be crippled or at least fettered.

In Wyatt and Surrey themselves, and in the generation that followed them, such cripplement or fettering did in fact follow. Not that the results were not often very pretty: but they were restrained within a vicious circle, and if emancipation had not followed, English lyric might have shared the fate of French. But when the greater Elizabethan generation came on, this could not continue: for the very essence of that generation was, while aping much that was foreign, to turn everything into English. First the influence of the almost universal fashion of song-writing and singing to actual music twisted or lured the 'feet of two syllables' themselves into movement of various times; then the popular ballad, which had always maintained the true liberty, began to force its way into literature: then, last and best of all, the dramatists, and especially Shakespeare, began to combine in their songs the formal variety and beauty of the miscellany and song-book kind with the informal beauty and variety of the ballad. So did English lyric, recovering its old many-strainedness, advance to far more than its old beauty in such things as 'Under the Greenwood Tree' and the songs of Ariel.

Yet this recovery was curiously partial, and the history of English Lyric during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a thing almost unique in literature. The trisyllabic foot maintained its place, but enlarged that place with singular slowness. One has a vague idea, till the question is actually studied, that metres like that of 'Under the Greenwood Tree' are largely represented in the abundant and exquisite melodies of what is sometimes called Jacobean-Caroline, sometimes Cavalier, and sometimes 'metaphysical' poetry.

As a matter of fact they are rather rare: and are only brought in tentatively in a few pieces of Waller and Cleveland. And as they grow commoner after the Restoration, the true lyric spirit drops. All through the century the very best work is done in the old common measure, informed and transformed indeed by such a wonderful touch that even the consummate lyrical poets of the nineteenth were hardly able to recover it. And when, on the other hand, the anapaest had thoroughly established itself by the hands of Dryden and Prior and certain unknown or half-known contributors to miscellanies, the prosodic critics (who were at last making their appearance, to no great purpose) set themselves to snub it, to tell it that it was low, disagreeable, only fit for burlesque, and the like.

Partly as a result of this the docile eighteenth century, though it did some charming light work in such measures, did not employ them for much that was serious; contenting itself for this latter class, as well as for not a little of the lighter kind also, with others of plain iambic run, especially the famous old *rime couée* or Romance six. But it did something else for what Johnson calls 'the greater Ode', which was of the highest importance for all lyric, and may justify, as it indeed requires, a certain return in the historical account. Up to this time nothing has been noticed but the smaller and more definitely song-like variety: and though, on one of the views of Anglo-Saxon poetry above referred to, such pieces as *The Ruin* and *The Seafarer* might have started lyric of a major compass, yet it was hardly till the Renaissance that really elaborate forms of this found a home with us. But then the imitation of the Italian *canzone* and the Greek Ode, whether choric in the dramatic fashion, or Pindaric, was practically certain. The magnificent instances of Spenser's *Prothalamion* and *Epithalamion*, if nothing else, would have made other attempts certain. Ben Jonson of course made attempts at the regular Pindaric: and it was not for want of experience of the real thing that Cowley set the example of the spurious variety which produced such Saharas of the dreariest stuff, with Dryden's and a few other fine things for oases. Congreve endeavoured to 'regularize': but it was not his vocation, and the matter was left for the epoch-making performances, in different styles, of Collins and of Gray. History, not appreciation, is the object here: but it is, if a criticism, a truly historical one to point out that, in these various attempts at the larger lyric, fresh strains of new hybridity were introduced into the kind. There is not merely a difference of subject and scale, there is not even merely a difference of treatment, between Gay's 'Molly Mog' and Collins's 'Passions',

between Chesterfield's lines on the other Molly—Lepel—and Gray's *Progress of Poetry*. The pairs present a contrast not merely in these respects (wherein similar contrasts can be found elsewhere, say in French), not merely in metre, not merely in diction, but, so to speak, in their whole specific differentia, if not actually in their very genus. One can perfectly well imagine the foreigners—it is not difficult in a way even to pardon or at least to understand the natives—who have at certain times refused to admit the different kinds as duly free-born or even as sufficiently naturalized sheep of the same fold. To what extent it may be legitimate to admit a fresh importation of foreign influence—or several such—at the Romantic revival, may be a debatable point. There certainly was once a tendency to exaggerate German influence. To me it seems that though there may have been a certain stimulation from Germany—which was very largely a reflux from that which older and even modern English had long been exercising on the literature of that country—the greater part by far of the yeast which effected the new fermentation was furnished directly from home-grown but long-neglected sources. But, in this way or that, an immense flood of new influence did of course come into all kinds of poetry, and into none more than lyric;—thus multiplying the peculiar appearance of heterogeneousness, the peculiar reality of many-sidedness and complexity with which I am endeavouring to deal in this paper. It had been by no means unknown or even uncommon for English poets, of great note in other departments of poetry, to write no lyric or very little: there was not one of the greater or lesser stars of the new school who was not prodigal of it.

No one need be told that their successors have even bettered the instruction. Tennyson, Browning, and Swinburne all wrote long poems: but they all also wrote great numbers of lyrics, and there are at least some who think that it is by these rather than by the others that not only the youngest of the three but his two great elders will live. Matthew Arnold wrote nothing that can be called a long poem, and hardly anything that is not lyric of one of our innumerable kinds. William Morris may be quoted on the other side: but the quotation would be open to several animadversions. In fact, the nineteenth century in English poetry was nothing if not lyrical. Nor was it so merely in abundance of undoubted, if apparently heterogeneous, lyrical work. It was so even more in the fashion in which it forced everything into the service of this branch of poetry. It would not have needed a specially hidebound example of the preceptist critic at any time earlier, to maintain—I am not sure that

we should have to go far at the present moment to find authorities of distinction who would still maintain—that a lyric composed exclusively in blank verse is a monstrosity if not an actual contradiction in terms, who would in fact ‘tell it to its face that it was no lyric’. Yet nineteenth-century poets, and great ones, have paid not the slightest attention to the rule. To name nothing else, what is ‘Love and Duty’ if it is not a lyric, and, as some of us would add, a most beautiful one? I can think of no other designation for it unless you call it a monodramatic soliloquy, and then I should for once allow a criticism which I am generally inclined to bar, and pronounce it a great deal too lyrical for anything that has a presumable connexion, not as a mere inset, with drama.

Yes, the body of nineteenth-century poetry is certainly in the first place (I do not say wholly) a *Corpus Lyricorum*, and if the survey which has been made is not entirely ‘out’ we may almost say also that the body of English poetry generally has been growing more and more lyrical throughout the ages, albeit with certain not unwholesome arrests and deviations from time to time. And once more, if that survey be not wholly a delusion, this lyrical determination has been effected under even more than the usual amount of foreign influence; by the absorption of even more than the usual proportion of extraneous matter, and by extending itself into varieties and complications unusual even in an English literary kind.

And now perhaps we approach something like an interim explanation at any rate of those doubts and undervaluations, at home and abroad, which have been glanced at. We are not, in this country, quite so unhappy without ‘kinds’ and tickets for kinds, as they are to some extent, though not so much as they were, in France, and as they are still more in Germany. But there are not a few, even of us, who experience discomfort in face of the unclassifiable, and he would be a very bold man, or else a mere mechanical nomenclator, who should attempt to classify English lyric. From that very first or almost first period when it was being written by men who were finding their patterns if not also using their pens indiscriminately in Latin, in English, and in French, there has been something of the buccaneer or of the free-lance (if that be a more respectful comparison) about its readiness to run up any flag, to follow any pattern, almost to be patient of any prosody.

Somebody, I think, has said that in the days of Elizabethan drama that form swallowed everything else, like the serpent from Aaron’s rod. I should not be afraid to apply something like the same figure to English lyric. Take *The Ancient Mariner*. If anybody denies that it

is a lyric, I do not know that I can prove it to be one by any method strictly recognized or recognizable by the schools. And yet if it is not a lyric I confess myself unable to recognize lyrical quality. Take *Rose Mary*. A precisian may endeavour to satisfy his principles by calling this a romance with lyrical insets; but surely the lyrical character abides throughout. The fact would seem to be that the extension which the ballad early received in our letters, and the way in which, though it was in a fashion turned out for a time, it forced itself back and has spread over the whole field of poetry since, puts English in a practically unique position. The French Romantics strove hard to rival it; and by the force of individual genius in one or two cases for a time succeeded. But the thing is not really in accordance with the genius of their poetry. On the other hand history, which cannot lie (though people sometimes, in fact rather frequently, try to make it do so), shows that this immense extension is in accordance with the genius of English. From the first we have, in the famous military phrase, 'let everything go in'—nay, have invited and almost forced everything to go in. We started with a dualism or a trinity of essence; I should hardly dare to attempt to indicate in any such notation the degree of complexity at which we have arrived.

But it should not be difficult to see that this overrunning of the fields of poetry by lyric may create difficulties with critics not to the manner born, and even with some who are. To me I confess the critical separation, so much favoured in Germany and very frequently adopted by our docile scholarship, of 'folk-poetry' and 'literary poetry', has never commended itself; while I have seldom been able to perceive that any great good arises from precise and elaborate separation of any literary kinds in so far at least as English is concerned. But, in the case of those who think differently, I can, of course, see their difficulty. Those who think, as I believe the majority of Germans do, that a lyric should be a distinct *lied*, may feel it anomalous when they are asked to accept *Lycidas*, or the *Epithalamion*, or Dryden's *Anne Killigrew* ode, or Collins on *The Superstitions of the Highlands*, or Wordsworth's *Immortality*, or *The Lotos Eaters*, or *The Triumph of Time* as a lyric. Those who—as almost all Frenchmen once did and as it may safely be said a great many of them in their hearts still do—regard a certain considerable regularity of form as a decency and almost a necessity, must constantly come across things of ours that seem to them only admissible to the outer courts where the licence of the *chansonnier* is permitted. And everybody who has the slightest acquaintance with the history of even English criticism knows the

constant objections that have been raised, the slow and grudging admission that has been granted, to every new extension, whether borrowed or invented, of the lyrical franchise.

Yet the historic genuineness and inevitableness of these extensions justifies itself the more we alter the points of view for historical survey. Suffer me to do this once more, and to trace, in a somewhat different way, the great procession of lyrical reinforcements which have gathered round English during the ages. It so happens that neither the 'all-lyric' nor the 'next-to-no-lyric' view of Anglo-Saxon prevents us from beginning once more at the beginning here. On the former view we find an original explanation of that all-absorbingness of the kind which has been noticed. On the other the peculiar character of the one indubitable example, *The Complaint of Deor*, and its possession of that quintessentially lyrical feature the refrain, at least gives us a notable start. In the passage of the earliest Middle English from alliterative-accentual rhythm to accentual-quantitative metre it is not fanciful to suspect the origin, to some extent at any rate, and perhaps to a large one, of that floating and unfettered if not positively Protean variety of form which, if to some of us it is the main source of beauty, has been allowed here to be to others a source of distrust if not of positive dislike. But with the firmer and completer impression of the new mould on the old mass the cleaner-cut models for which these others yearn are provided, in abundance and not without exquisiteness, yet by no means to the exclusion or annihilation of the wood-notes. The rush of contribution from all quarters, during the thirteenth century more especially, is only less marvellous than the ease with which this rush was accepted, disciplined, and absorbed. The ordered elegance and strength combined of the Latin hymn metres; the more fantastic outline and the more elaborately symphonic melodies, chorused and trilled with all kinds of musical refrain, that came from the romances and *pastourelles* of Northern France; the still more elaborately woven paces of Provençal song-magic which, alien as it might seem, was to furnish us with many things and in particular to flood the miracle plays with that artful and ancient measure long afterwards to be associated with the name of Burns,—all these we accepted and made ours. We took, possibly in the long run from Brittany, that peculiar device of the 'Lai'-hybrid between romance in the English sense and romance in the French. And in the midst of all this borrowing we were able to show how little we were driven to borrow anything, though it pleased us to borrow so much, by elaborating—it would seem from purely home sources and by mere natural evolution of the long line which had itself been one product

of the double stave of Old English, as the octosyllabic couplet was another—the great common or ballad measure.

Indeed this simple-seeming but mighty metre—possessed with a difference by other nations of course, but nowhere existing in such a wonderful variety of application as with us—is a sort of mirror in little of the nature, history, and character of English lyric generally. Its crossbred development has been noticed; but even after the generic or specific form has been reached it is constantly taking on new colours, acquiring fresh tones from its neighbours, and for its purposes it lends itself, as in *Gamelyn*, to the accentual alliterative revival, it shows itself patient, as in *Chevy Chase*, of extensions, enlargements, and variations which, centuries afterwards, will give the great result of *The Ancient Mariner* itself.

But side by side with it, or almost so, English lyric tries another development as opposed as possible to this in principle—the following of the elaborate forms, *ballade*, *rondeau*, and the rest, which had been so popular in France for some time past, and had indeed rather too much mannerized French lyric itself. The result with us was rather indecisive, nor can the attempts that have been made to renew the experiment—the last and most serious some thirty or forty years ago, though by writers some of the best of whom are still living—be said to have settled the question. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries these forms were tried by poets whose genius was not specially lyrical; in the nineteenth century poets of excellent lyrical capacity tried them, but did not altogether succeed in freeing them from the taint of the literary exercise. I think it is safe to say that, in that unequalled process of literary importation and colonization which is supplying great part of the subject of this paper, it will always be found that the successful examples have been made to be themselves with a distinctly English difference—with a bold indulgence in equivalence and substitution. And I think there is something more to be made of *ballade* and *rondeau* than has yet been accomplished, charming as some of the actual accomplishments are. But the question is still under the judgement of Time.

Enough has been said already of the wonderful and still too much neglected flow of almost entirely anonymous lyric which, in measures mostly between the essentially native common measure and the essentially foreign ‘forms’, flooded the despised fifteenth century; and something has been said already of the alterations—less free than the ballad and freer than the *ballade*—which formed part of the Wyatt and Surrey Renaissance. But a little should be added as to the sources of the immense and delightful flood of lyric which belongs to

the last quarter of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth.

Here, as hardly anywhere else, to an extent equally great and at the same time equally certain, there is an enormous debt due to Music. There may be reasons for doubting whether that heavenly maid has not sometimes played the Circe (who, let it be remembered, was also of unquestionably heavenly extraction) to poetry; but at this time her influence was as wholesome as it was divine. The earlier Miscellanies which give us the poems of Lodge and Breton, and a score of other known and unknown masters of poetic music, constantly supply the actual tunes which suggested the rhythms employed. So do the collected poems of not a few individual poets, with Sidney at their head; while it is obvious that the poetic forms thus suggested were copied (perhaps latterly with a less frequent eye to actual singing) by Jacobean and Caroline poets in succession. Not seldom, too, as in the capital instance of Campion, poet and musician met in the same person; and the variety of the one art transferred itself, with the least possible difficulty, to the other. With the disuse of actual performance by non-professional persons and in ordinary home life, this influence may have ceased, and it is probably a little, if not very much, more than a coincidence that a good deal of the lyric *afflatus* ceased likewise. But an immense body of tried forms had meanwhile been secured for English. Airs from German, High and Low, airs French and Spanish and Italian; the old English dance and ballad music; and by degrees measures from Scotch and Welsh; contributed their inspiration and left their impression after a fashion which is unthinkable in some other languages.

The eighteenth century did not do much in this way, but it did something; and, low as we are apt to rank it in the lyrical scale, it cannot be thanked too warmly for that education, refinement, and adaptation to various uses and combinations of the anapaest which has been referred to. It is all very well to dismiss the Ansteyan trisyllables as doggerel. At their most slipshod—and they did not very often deserve that adjective—they beat regular time, more or less triple, into the head of the nation, as the couplet had beaten double time; and the consequence was that when the new concert of voices arose the initial work necessary for the combination of the two in fresh lyrical forms was done, and done thoroughly.

A few more words, from this new point of view, on the lyric of the last hundred years will not, I trust, be intolerable. I do not think that music has during that time played anything like the part in its begetting that was played by it in the days of Shakespeare and in

those of Milton. The musical influence had indeed been very strong on Burns; but it was not that part of him that in turn influenced his successors. In the school that followed, only Moore felt it much; and though Moore has been unjustly depreciated of late, he was certainly not of the greatest. Nor of yet younger generations of singers can anything very different be said. But by this time the various processes—age-long, subtly working, constantly varied—had given English lyric a faculty of using the powers it had acquired such as no language known to me, except Greek, has ever equalled in intensity, and such as Greek itself cannot rival on the side of freedom. After trying what, if not exactly a blind alley, is a by-road leading neither very far nor to a very fertile or delightful country—the way of unrhymed stanza, regular or Pindaric—it sought more natural methods, and reached by them results of almost bewildering beauty and diversity. It recovered the ballad; or, to speak with uttermost exactness, it substituted for the sing-song of Percy, and even of Goldsmith, the infinite and never-staling variety begun by Southey and perfected by Coleridge. It raised, by a sort of joint but unconcerted dead-lift, the trisyllabic metres from instruments of pleasant jingle to equality with the grandest measures. And above all it showed, by that unabashed and unhesitating practice which does more than all the preaching or lecturing in the world, that no combination of line-length, rhyme-order, or foot-combination is necessarily, or even very probably, forbidden to the English lyric poet. There is an incident in critical history which I may for some small number of readers or hearers have quoted before, but which seems to me difficult to hackney as a lesson and a warning—the condemnation of Tennyson's 'A spirit haunts the year's last bowers' by a critic of no small ability, entirely free from any general prejudice against the poet, and writing nearly twenty years after that poet had made his appearance. 'What metre, Greek or Roman, Russian or Chinese, it was intended to imitate' the aggrieved censor 'had no care to inquire: the man was writing English and had no justifiable pretence for torturing our ears.' It was unfortunate for this Aristarchus, who had almost deserved to be called Zoilus, that every movement in the incriminated measure could be paralleled from no less English a poet than Shakespeare. But the general line of his criticism was more unfortunate still. Had he attended to those features of the historic progress of English poetry, and especially of English lyric, to which I have ventured to recall your attention to-day, he would hardly have thought even to give a favourable first colouring to his case by the fling as to Russian and Chinese. He would have known that nothing is alien to English

until it has been proved so ; and that the proof is by no means always forthcoming—that it is, in fact, never to be accepted from the first apparent failure. Here, indeed, the failure was only in his own ears, but it is pretty certain that he had wilfully, if not perhaps quite consciously, organized that failure beforehand by allowing an arbitrary Alien Act to exercise sway over them, and by rejecting the probability, if not even the possibility, of that naturalization which, as I have tried to show, is the very first law of our poetical, especially of our lyrical constitution.

But we should come to results. One result, which has for some years brought itself home to me, is the impossibility of reducing the forms of English lyric to any kind of tabular classification that shall be even at the moment satisfactory, still more to any that shall not be defeated, while it is in the very making, by the restless energy and vivacity, and the magnetic attraction for new matter and form, which is characteristic of the kind. I attempted it once myself on a very small scale and in material which was rounded off and finished—the lyric, that is to say, of the mediaeval drama and of one or two single MSS. of miscellanies. The work was severe enough even there, where there was no fear of the dead men rising to put in more inventions. But the additions since mediaeval times have made the task practically impossible, though I know that it has been tried by a most worthy hand ; and the considerations which have been now advanced make it, I think, certain that the enumerator only lays himself open to the charge of *μόχθος περισσός*, though I will not continue the Aeschylean tag. Innumerable are the forms of English lyric as the famous comparisons of the love-poets of antiquity, or as the subjects on which those comparisons are usually made.

There is, however, one point of some importance on which I should like to make some remarks before concluding, and which may give this paper something more than the interest of a mere retrospect. It is sometimes objected to critics who are not young, that though they may have been very ready to acknowledge and welcome the innovations of the past, there comes a time when, like the ingenuous Mr. Baxter, they say, ‘Ah, but we were in the right, while these fellows are dreadfully in the wrong.’

My withers are not wrung by this insinuation. It is, I suppose, known to most people who take an interest in English poetry that for some time past efforts have been made to construct it, and especially the lyrical parts of it, on principles different from those which, since Spenser at any rate, to avoid controversy as much as possible, have governed the matter ; and partly to revert, partly to shift in an experi-

mental advance, to a system of 'stresses' independent of such distribution as is necessitated by any arrangement of feet, if we use that term in the sense of identically or equivalently valued groups of syllables.

Now I do not profess to be *cupidus novarum rerum* in anything, but I make a very grave distinction between the matters or departments where *res novae* have generally shown themselves to be bad, and those where they have frequently shown themselves to be good. And I make a further and still graver distinction between the matters and departments where the bad consequences are more or less irreparable, or only to be got rid of at frightful cost and pain, and those where these bad things simply die of their own badness. This last is the fortunate case with poetry. English lyric—we have just seen it—has been built up of experiment—sometimes bad, more often good. The latter experiments are a joy unto this day and will be a joy for all time: the former are harmless and even rather interesting mummies—dead long ago of their own want of life, but preserved as lessons for us by Time, the embalmer, who leaves nothing but clean work, though sometimes a little dusty!

We may therefore, perhaps, endure for the present and await for the future these and other innovations with complete equanimity. I must confess that I have not as yet derived much profit or delight from them as such. I have read some agreeable poems or lines avowedly constructed on the new principles; but it has in these cases happened, curiously enough, that I could always reduce them to the old. I have read some that did not delight me at all, but then I found that the old principles clearly accounted for the want of delectableness. And the true critic is always, as they say in those publications which have so largely replaced literature in general favour, 'open to offers': his mind is like the old basket at the Foundling, ready to receive deposits legitimate and illegitimate. He cannot indeed prevent some of these infants from having been born with incurable defects, or save them from more or less immediate death. But he does not kill them, he only announces with decent regret that their maladies are remediless and their chance of survival small.

Those of us who are young enough, therefore, may perhaps see stress-lyric without strict metre, but relying on peculiarly ordered rhythm only, re-established in English poetry. *Non moror, non sum invidus*. They may also see actual Russian and Chinese measures brought in, as those languages come to be more studied among us. If these strangers can put on the wedding garment, as, it has been shown, so many other strangers have done before, well and good: happiness and luck go with them as with their forerunners in naturaliza-

tion from the time when (and for the matter of that long before) Sidney borrowed *Willelmus van Nassau*, to that when Moore attempted the strange and beautiful if not perfectly achieved measure of

‘At the mid hour of night, when stars are weeping, I fly’.

At the same time, lest I seem to any one to have manifested an unacademical promiscuity, and to have abandoned that duty of coast-guard in matters literary which is certainly one of the first obligations of the *sacramentum* of such an institution as this, let me finish with a reference of the most serious and unaffected character to two words I lately used—the words ‘wedding garment’. There is a wedding garment of English in regard to lyric as to all other divisions of literature; and it is not to be found pell-mell or at random even in such a warehouse as that of Mr. Solomon Lucas, of Eatanswill and immortal memory. Rather is it like the famous and painfully discriminating mantles of Romance—if not even like the garment which Morgane la Faye sent by that unlucky damsel to her brother. If it be assumed hastily, unwisely, or by the wrong person, unpleasant things will happen. History tells us that, as it practically tells us everything. But it tells us also that adventures are to the adventurous and, save by mere accident, to the adventurous only. I have endeavoured to show, on the strictest historical grounds, that the accomplishment of English lyric is one long and almost unbroken record of successful adventure, now less successful, now more, but always or almost always pursuing, if sometimes faintly, and always in the long run extending the boundaries of its kingdom. Other kinds have dwindled or died, have become fossil or have at least gone into apparent abeyance. This has not. As it has been, so may it be.

Bdg. Sec.

MAY 30 1973

PR
504
S35

Saintsbury, George Edward
Bateman

The historical character
of English lyric

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

ERINDALE COLLEGE LIBRARY



